

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 756

HE 009 070

TITLE Obstacles to Innovation Within the University Organization. Current Project. R & D for Higher Education.

INSTITUTION National Swedish Board of Universities and Colleges, Stockholm. Research and Development Unit.

PUB DATE 77

NOTE 7p.

AVAILABLE FROM The National Swedish Board of Universities and Colleges, P.O. Box 16334, S-103 26 Stockholm, Sweden

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Educational Administration; *Educational Change; *Educational Innovation; Higher Education; Operations Research; *Organization; *Organizational Development; Research; *Universities

IDENTIFIERS *Sweden

ABSTRACT

The traditional university structure has come to be seen as an obstacle to necessary changes in education and research in Sweden. Reforms initiated by the Swedish Parliament have focused mainly on the overall control of university organization; less change appears in the direct production of education and research. A project underway at the University of Gothenburg has as its purpose to identify and locate structural factors at the departmental level that can be said to obstruct the university's capacity for renewal and development. The problem is approached by looking at the influences working on the university's components as well as the institutional structure and processes. The project was begun in 1975, and a final report will be presented in 1978.

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R & D for Higher Education

INFORMATION ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

ED140756

CURRENT PROJECT

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PROJECT TITLE: Obstacles to innovation within the university organization

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The advent of the mass education society has brought with it new problems and has placed heavy demands on university organizations. As the role of higher education in society has expanded, demands have successively been made for smoother interaction between universities and the community at large. The traditional university structure has come to be seen as an obstacle to necessary changes in education and research. Reforms initiated by the Government and Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament) have mainly focussed on the overall control of university organization. Less change would appear to have been undergone, on the other hand, by the direct production of education and research. Since the individual institutions represent the units in which actual production takes place, their ability to generate innovations for purposes of renewal will be crucial to the extent to which the university organization will be able to assert its specific role in social development. The

purpose of the present project is to identify and locate structural factors at departmental level which can be said to obstruct the capacity for renewal and development.

STRATEGY

As a rule obstacles to innovation are not directly observable. They only become apparent when a close and detailed study is made of processes and mechanisms in a specific sequence of change. It is only when one can study processes which have had results in the form of discontinued or accomplished changes that any resistance or obstacles can become apparent. The impediments which are assumed to arise and prevent or obstruct innovation processes, i.e. activities designed to bring about decisive changes in the productive activities of the department are expected to appear as a result of underlying structural factors. These structural factors constitute the frames and preconditions creating the motivation, freedom of movement and anticipated behaviour which in the ultimate analysis will have a decisive effect on the ability of an institution to develop in a positive direction.

A process oriented approach of the relating obstacles to underlying factors in the structure of the department call for a combination of two perspectives, namely a process perspective and a structural perspective. Processes represent the behaviour which occurs in the structure and can be seen as a result of the structural design. Thus the structure can be viewed as a function steering the processes. The idea of a combination of structure and process (or behaviour) as a realistic method of studying different types of organization over a longer period of time is supported by various authors, including Pettigrew (1973) and Sandberg (1975).

In order to understand the processes which appear in an organization, it may be worth while to study them as if they essentially can be assigned to two categories with regard to the aspect of change:

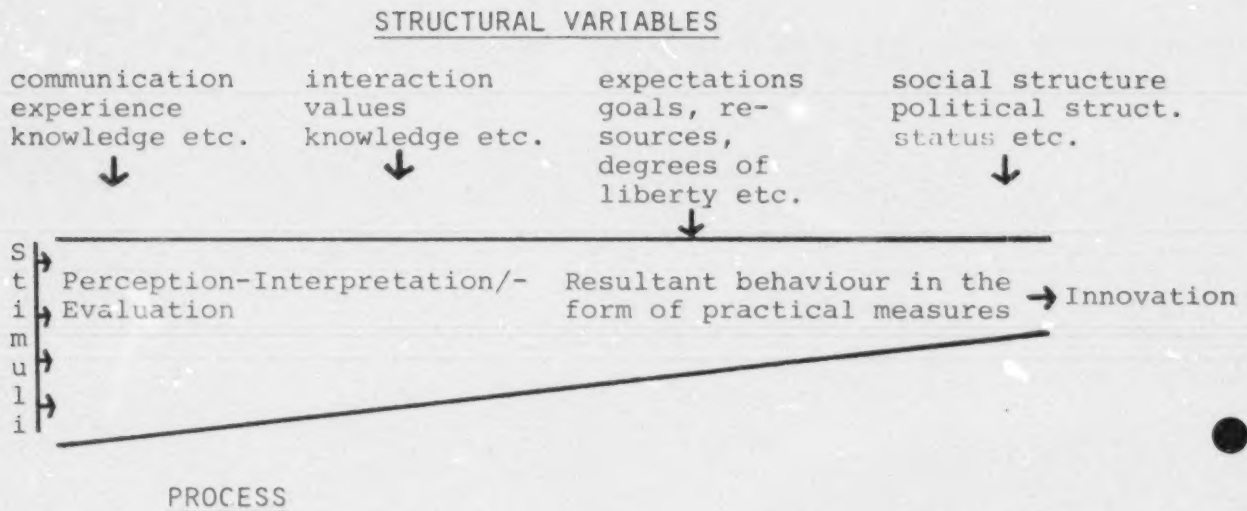
- 1) Innovative processes, i.e. those processes in the organization which are aimed at transforming the existing structure.
- 2) Structurally preservative processes, i.e. the continuous processes (e.g. production, administration, decision making and such like) which are needed for the maintenance of the daily activities and which as forms of acquired be-

haviour have the effect of perpetuating the structure, but also those processes which occur as a direct counter-force to innovative processes and are in this sense aimed at preserving the prevailing structure.

Since processes are expressions of the actions of individual persons, certain individuals will, passively or actively, support the existing structure while others will act to bring about its transformation. From the point of view of the individual, actions will for obvious reasons depend on such factors as experience of the possibilities of influencing the prevailing situation to suit one's purposes and awareness of alternative directions of change. The fact is that an organization needs processes of both kinds, so that structurally preservative processes play an important part in many cases.

If attention were to focus exclusively on the structure of the organization and processes generated therein, a very important factor would be overlooked which helps to explain why processes arise in the first place and what it is that keeps them going. This factor may be termed the stimulus factor. Innovative processes are presumed to occur as a result of the structure (system) being confronted with some form of stimulus, direct or indirect, from the environment - for example, via personnel mobility and communication. The necessity of responding to events in the community at large is growing more and more pressing for the sake of constructive development, and it is to be expected that more and more organizations will be forced to adjust to a structure more closely resembling the organic (Burns & Stalker, 1961), a more open interaction with the community at large (J. Thompson, 1967) and a greater variety on the part of the organization in its response to events in the community at large (Ashby, 1964).

A previously selected palpable stimulus will play an important part in the project. The impending reform of higher education (U68/H75) will be regarded as such a stimulus. This reform also has the advantage of affecting all institutions, thus facilitating comparative studies between them. Stimulus, the generation of processes and the structural variables connected with those processes can be illustrated as follows:



PERCEPTION

We believe that the possibilities of utilizing stimuli in the environment are greatly influenced by the external contact networks of individual persons or that individuals are constantly receiving new ideas and experience via personal mobility at the institution and/or that individuals display a highly variegated involvement.

INTERPRETATION/EVALUATION

Lack of information, the feeling of inability to do anything about the situation, uninvolvement and insufficient loyalty may be factors explaining why perceived events in the environment, which *per se* ought to be capable of development, do not produce any results within the institution.

RESULTANT BEHAVIOUR IN THE FORM OF PRACTICAL MEASURES

Experience of previous unsuccessful attempts at change, uncertainty concerning directions of change worth aiming for and the experience of limited resources and degrees of liberty may be among the obstacles precluding any resultant behaviour.

Action emanating from the social and political power structure may in the ultimate analysis be the reason why processes of change, once initiated, are eventually curtailed or passivized.

The above process is to be regarded as a filtration process whereby various structural variables in an

intervowen pattern eventually result in only a very few innovations being implemented at the department. (In the above figure, the structural variables have been divided up into stages mostly for the sake of simplicity. Several structural variables probably operate in more than one stage and are therefore difficult to refer to a specific stage of the process.)

The possibilities of studying how the department interacts with its surroundings, to what extent this interaction leads to reappraisal and change within education and research at the department, make it necessary to study the processes constantly in progress at a department, and they also make it necessary for this study to cover a considerable period of time. A great deal of the activities of a department proceed informally. This calls for participating observation combined with supplementary investigation methods.

EXECUTION AND TIMETABLE

Four social science departments are being studied in the course of the project. The investigation will begin with a historical and structural analysis in which an exploration is made of the background and present situation. It is expected that greater emphasis will gradually be placed on participating observation combined with repeated measurement procedures.

The project began in 1975 and a final report will be presented in 1978.

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1977-03-01